

Arnold L. Mitchem

The Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), under the leadership of Arnold Mitchem, is the only national organization dedicated to furthering the expansion of postsecondary opportunities for low-income and first-generation students. Established in 1981, COE serves the interests of college opportunity professionals at major U.S. higher education institutions. Through nearly 3,000 federal TRIO programs, these individuals help low-income and first-generation students overcome class, social, academic, and cultural barriers to enter college and graduate. COE provides members with national advocacy on Capitol Hill, educational resources, and networking opportunities as well as offers research and information through the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education and the Louis Stokes Institute for Opportunity in STEM Education.

Arnold Mitchem, COE's president since its inception, has spent his entire career advocating for equal access to postsecondary education and success of students in the United States—which he views as an extension of the Civil Rights Movement. He is responsible for creating minority leadership for college access issues. He was also the founder of the concept of “first-generation” students. This better described the students he sought to assist and moved access issues beyond racial boundaries to show that access was a more widespread problem. This concept was adopted in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1980.

Mitchem has received honorary doctoral degrees from nine American Universities and one in Europe. He is, in fact, the only American to receive an honorary degree from the University of Liverpool. He is the recipient of numerous leadership and service awards for his contribution and commitment to educational opportunity for underserved students.

Mitchem is a leading champion of the federally-funded TRIO programs—which motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree and which have helped 3.4 million students prepare for, get into, and succeed in postsecondary education. The TRIO programs—which help low-income and first-generation learners, students with disabilities, adult learners, and veterans overcome financial, social, and cultural barriers to education—are the largest and oldest out-of-school institutional programs to close the achievement gap with respect to access and success. This growing gap in educational attainment between America's highest and lowest income students—despite similar talents and potential—is detrimental to our success as a nation.